

An abstract painting featuring a central vertical yellow stripe. To its left and right are vertical stripes of red and blue, separated by dark, expressive black outlines. The overall style is gestural and expressive, with visible brushstrokes and a textured surface.

And then
there is
this

Ken Tomaro

And then there is this
by Ken Tomaro

AND THEN THERE IS THIS, ©2025

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FORWARD

After I had finished writing *Home is where the headstones* are I realized the words and poetry kept coming. Someone told me, “A writer writes,” so I did. For no reason whatsoever I decided I wanted to write a series of shorter poems and called it *Drowning in my shorts*.

I rarely go back and reread old poetry but decided to clean some things up. In rereading this series, I noticed a much angrier tone in my writing, so I changed the title to reflect that. I make no apologies. I had a bad couple of years and any kind of mental illness takes its toll, but I felt it important enough to show the ugly side of depression.

I numbered these instead of killing myself trying to think of titles. The numbers are all jacked up because I deleted a few poems. It’s ok, you’ll live.

As always, my work is grounded in reality with the themes of depression, death, love, childhood memories and dreams.

1

contrary to the popular opinion
productivity does not require
wearing pants
mulling over poignant thoughts
meeting of great minds
but sometimes merely
opening one's eyes
and getting out of bed

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2

I think mother earth is pretty selfish
the people on it,
that goes without saying
but I mean the planet itself
just keeps spinning
not waiting for a second
for us to catch up
no making up for lost time
no going back
even when we move forward
somehow, we still
fall behind

3

he is just lying there
wide eyed and dead-like
staring up at the ceiling
because it doesn't judge him like
the floor and the walls do
or the windows

4

the snow was ankle deep in spots
and still falling
and the streets were a slushy gray
and she was gone

5

and it was just then
while sitting on the toilet
eating a sandwich
that I had an epiphany about the bottle
but it was lost
in a single flush

I saw a skull
the strangest skull I had ever seen
flames shot from its eyes
in a confetti of colors
and then in colors I had never seen
It had rows and rows of teeth
there were teeth
where teeth shouldn't be
and tiny snakes
wrapping around its temples
down under its chin
and it looked content

the cigarette butt sailed from my hand
into the sidewalk gutter
and by a stroke of complete luck
hit a bird
it was just as taken by surprise as I was
it would be a day full of surprises

I swung the axe
several times into his head
and although each time cut deep
there was no blood
and it did nothing to stop him
it was then that I realized
the person I was trying to kill was me
but I would not die

11

this must be
what hell is like

/a hundred people talking at once
while I'm standing in the corner
looking at a potted plant/

I have a vivid memory
of bashing my knee
hard into a tall tree when I was a child
the problem is it never happened
there are no scars
no stiff joints in the changing weather
I can kick a ball
or walk a mile
and never think about it
yet this strange memory exists
and there is no reason for it

the rain came
and it soaked through my coat
soaked into my shoes
deep into my skin
for three blocks it ran down my face
and under my nose,
a cold rain too
but when I reached home
and opened the gate
it had stopped

when the rush of the pill wears off
the brain has a sort of detached fear
and your teeth aren't teeth
rather, walls your tongue must climb
to reach the outside world
your beard freezes
and it makes more sense
to climb under the covers
than to wrap yourself in them
and my head aches
like the back of a mountain

behind the copper beast
behind a wall of sleep
is a bitter aroma
which permeates everything for days
yet people swarm
taking what it has to offer
like burnouts
addicts
they can't live without it

all I can think of
are the mountains
and how they are black,
where the snow should be
on top of a burning orange
and my head still aches
because my brain is suffocating
under all this skin

he was dressed
in a bright red shirt
against a spatter of gray
and running
as far away from it
as he could

this feeling of fear
and fuzzy head
I don't like it
I can't shake it
as if this brain inside my head
isn't mine
but its own entity
and it's staring at me
I am detached but aware
I am looking around in a world
where I have a dirty little secret
no one knows but me

the two plants on my cabinet
are looking rather sickly
and depressed
I suppose I could water them more than once
every couple weeks
but I like for them to know
I'm the one in control

there was a light post
attached to a bridge
it was long and thin
and hung downward
as if the light had given up
it reminded me of a sickly old man
who had seen enough of the world
and no longer had it in him
to hold his head up

there was an old man
attached to the sidewalk
he reminded me of a light post
gently swaying in the breeze
yet still unmoving
tolerant of it all
as if he had seen so much of the world
and wanted to see so much more
from where he stood

I'd like to be a zoo animal
it doesn't matter what,
any animal
no bills
no nothing
just eating and shitting
and parading around for the people
which, now that I think of it
I've already gotten my wish

the four horsemen of the apocalypse
riding against a gray-black sky
across the bridge
of the burning river
the quintessential image
of this rusty city

I prefer
to ease into the day rather than
starting it by fending off
a shower spider
and life is ultimately harder
when you have all the sense
god gave a duck

suddenly I felt
as if I was someplace else
rather than here and now
a tropical place
filled with people and
colorful little shops
but the people got smaller and smaller
as they walked on
until they were tiny dots and then nothing
and I still felt no bigger
than any of them

if your face
was peeling from your skull

strands of flesh, like yarn
blowing in the wind

all of it floating against the backdrop
of suffering
you would have the same look
as he

so many people
act as if a life without kids
is not worth living
well, I'll tell you this
I have a circle of grown adults
who kick and scream
throw tantrums
listen to no one and
shit themselves
so I fail to see
exactly what I'm missing

I don't discuss the event
leading up to the occasion
but I was given the opportunity
to stare into the eyes of the devil himself
I could tell by the look
on his burning face
that he didn't want me
I never asked if that was good or bad
I just went on my way
and he's never bothered me since

31

in between the black smoke
and fumes
chaos and destruction
was a flame
that could not be distinguished
tower
city
burning

32

and the stream split off
in different directions
over the rocks
into a pool deep below the Earth
where it swirled into the unknown
and I was the only one to witness it
like it was meant
for me and no one else
so I had this moment
all to myself

that little fucker
won't stop kneading me
like a piece of dough
can't take a shit without him clawing at the door
I can't even open a pack of cigarettes
without him thinking it's a can of tuna
that little fucker is always underfoot
and the peace of mind
without him
might drive me insane

she was the kind of
classy looking
that made you beat your head
against your own fist
wondering what he had
and you didn't

every so often
I want to go back,
back to the days
of mountain dew and moon pies
but they are gone for a reason
if we were meant
only to live in past moments
then time would never
move at all

we had been driving for
what seemed like days
passing the same brick building
over and over
panic struck, I started to wonder
what if the world I'm supposed to be in
is just on the other side of the building we keep passing
and I can't get to it
because I'm stuck in this world full of panic

grape Kool-Aid
powdered iced tea
sucking a stream of water
from a plastic squirt gun
stale bubble gum
from a pack of trading cards
I remember you all fondly

the old, speckled hen
sitting on her worn wooden perch
staring at me
I grab her neck, quickly
with a hard snap
I smile
and feel the cold liquid
on the back of my throat,
cool and sweet
somewhere in the distance
the gods are peering
through the patchy blueish clouds
and I tip my drink to them

it was the Cadillac of baby strollers
everything from bucket seats
to cup holders
I was annoyed, in a mood
leave me alone and I'll gladly reciprocate
for guys like me who have nothing,
staring out the window of a coffee shop
is all the peace I've got
I made the mistake of looking in her direction
at the exact moment she realized
she didn't know how to get through the door
stroller in one hand
organic coffee in the other
I gave it some thought:
this is what happens
when you have kids
but I did it anyway,
opened the door for her
and went back to my business

it's not the cold, it's the wind
they say
no really,
it's the god damn cold
that does me in

where are these drunken old men
who can't see their hands
in front of their faces
getting these wads of cash
to feed their drunken habit
and I'm wondering
where the rent money will come from

some people want to watch
the world go by
and some want to have
more kids than they need
others complain
give up
walk off
living content in the lie
that everything is better
wrapped in bacon
and I prefer to sit back
and watch the embers burn
sometimes fanning the flames

these terrible people
so many of them
pretending to care
but only for themselves, mostly

those living high on the hog
don't seem to realize
how short the fall is
from the hog's backside

waiting for a break in the rain
waiting for it to stop
waiting on something, everything
and always too busy to realize
maybe life is telling me
to slow down
because whatever I'm waiting on
can wait a little longer

I have read so many stories
and poems
with phrases like:
she wore her heart on her sleeve
love isn't like that
when it's bad my heart feels like
a charred piece of old driftwood
and when it's good
well, I'll tell you that
when it happens

rain-soaked mattresses
old wooden doors
and piles of brittle, rotting tires
enough for a fleet of
brittle, rotting cars
lay on the hillside for all to see
next to that a river of trash
floating in a milky brown
and I expected to see a fish
with three eyes or
a serpent-like tail
wiggling from its forehead

I have been losing my dreams lately
they have become nothing but hazy
quite literally a blurry image
I can't make out
and after I have woken up
and the hours have passed
and the day is gone
I am left with nothing worthwhile
to remember

as a reminder to the office policy
there will be no more laughter
unless it is cleared with
your immediate supervisor first
have a wonderful day and
thank you for helping make us
the great company we are today!

I hear the click-click
of a beautiful pair of legs
in heels I imagine might cut through
my soul
as I turn to look
I see they aren't lovely at all
or legs for that matter
but horse's hooves
rearing up to stomp
on my bitter heart

there used to be so much,
I imagine
in these old buildings
scattered along the way
empty and crumbling
only a stinging reminder now
of mistakes made
and changing times
but maybe not for the better

59

and like a 747, he lifted off
from the edge
but a grave miscalculation
sent him headfirst
into the thick branch of a tree
that snapped like a matchstick
and made a horrible sound
the force of the blow sending him into
a barrel roll
and finally resting by the side
of the rocky pond
where he wallowed like a drunken walrus
in the tall wet grass
and this is why
we don't swim in May

60

it was in the far, fading past
that I was someone important
fooling everyone
and teaching the things I knew so little about
and now I'm just an old fool
living in the far, fading past

61

I have

slept with enough women
but this particular one
smelled like burnt flesh
and cheap cocoa butter
her bed was comfortable though
so I rode it out as long as I could
although I still find it difficult
to eat grilled meat
at times

the tall man came for me
as he had done many times before
in my dreams
frail like death and pale like death
but a towering man
balls formed from molten steel
and each time I lay paralyzed with fear
and each time he reached for me
with his crippled old hands
to drag away
the sky opened up
and the sun broke, blinding
and as I had done so many times before
escaped his reach yet again

I wonder if I climbed to the top
of the rusted old train bridge
that had been half swallowed into the Earth
and jumped into the soupy river below
what it would be that killed me
would my heart stop from fear
or my neck snap from the fall
or would it be that my lungs filled
with the tainted water
and then I wonder why
I wonder such a thing

It is a bit unsettling
the judgmental stares
from the faces
of a painting

I saw him pull the trigger
and felt the bullet go into my head
there was no pain that I recall
just a spray of fluid as
I fell to the ground
in the next moment
I was proudly showing off the scar
which was nothing more than a scratch
on my temple
and thought nothing more of my death
after that

I often wonder
what a miserable existence it would be
for both of us
if she were still alive
my life is enough of a struggle
without wondering
how to care for someone
whose mind has gone

when the faceless demons live in your dreams
and death keeps a watchful eye
and fear doesn't let you live a single peaceful moment
the unknown is the only thing
you truly know and it all makes Halloween
look like a birthday party

68

it was a charcoal moon
that smudged across the sky
when I touched it
melting into a pillowy fog
behind the fading mountains
but the thing I remember most
was the winding path that rose above everything
before it trailed off in the distance
into nothing
no clear sign of where it led
only the knowledge that it would be
a long walk
and knowing I should have worn
more comfortable shoes

69

I stood at the edge of a cliff
deep in the woods
when you see no bottom and no end
you know it's going to be a hard fall
and if for some reason you manage
to live through it
and you are looking up
instead of down
the cruel feeling of despair
will surely eat you alive
when there is no way out

sometimes it is really all too much
the noise from grown adults acting like children
and children acting like children
explosively giggling in my ears
all this noise and talking
from people I do not want to talk to

he sits, lifeless
random greasy strands,
what's left of his hair
are pasted across his head
he is old
and beaten
nursing his beer
I think it will still be there
long after he is gone into dust
and for once,
he is not me

I remember a deep sadness
melting into my skin
as the car pulled out of the driveway

it began to snow
and I was barely tall enough
to see out the window

the castle was gone,
nothing more than a couch again

the house was quiet

school would start again
in a few days

everything would soon be
back to normal

but in this moment
I felt a deep sadness
that left me frozen
like the snow falling
around me

the bucket list,
what an interesting concept
but only a dream
if you don't even have
a pot to piss in

out of sight
and out of mind
taken for granted
all these things
and now they are gone
replaced with guilt

Bukowski was right
life is a steaming
pile of vomit
most of the time
but all it takes
is a stiff drink or
a good lay or
spare change
in your pocket
to make it
worth living
sometimes

good night ethel barrymore
your dog is the funeral
your dog is the funeral if
it is just picking up the phone
and having a bad day
and that is why I went to bed

(no one could have predicted it)

why should my poetry
rhyme
when life
has no rhyme
or reason

I don't love it
the rhythm, that is
but there is a certain
power to it
and having written it
perhaps I may be the only one
who understands the power

as the path ended
it opened up into
a strange looking swamp
shared by the living and the dead
old, rotted, leafless trees
sat decaying at the edge
of the blazing orange banks of the swamp
what wasn't dead was covered
in a layer of cotton candy
greens and blues
complete silence
no birds rustling in the trees
no frogs chirping on the fallen branches
no wind blowing through
what was still standing
after wandering for days
on the barren path I left behind
I had finally found the peace
I didn't know existed

an army of goats
in a straight, still line
stared at me with an anger
I have never seen
they had two sets of horns,
one of them pointing to the sky
ready to gore anyone
who fell from heaven

I have reached a tender age
where life around me ceases
with each coming moment
and although I never expected
to come this far
it is not a place
I am happy to be

I suppose you could
compare life to the
branches of a tree

each branch a different path

some shorter and
some less stable

but in the end
each branch leads
to the same place

how nice to be
a speck in a painting
a leaf
a bee
the window of a building in a cityscape
it doesn't matter,
so long as I can see the world
from another perspective

I remember at such an early age
how frail she had become
nothing but skin and skeleton now
and I remember thinking
I could lift her over my head
with one arm if I tried
and I remember thinking
this was no longer the woman
who chased me around the room
as I laughed hysterically
scolded me when I had done wrong
tucked me under the covers
she is no longer the woman
I think I remember

I recall the lyrics:

there'll be peace when you walk on

I have worn out shoes
a hundred times over
and this life has been
anything but peaceful
and my feet are tired

change is inevitable
it is the wonder of
where the next dollar will come from
that is uncertain

as the beer flows so does the prospect
of beautifully written words
strange how I remember the things I couldn't
while I was sober
like so many others
I drink to forget
but when I drink
I remember all those things
long forgotten
and somehow
people mistake it
for poetry

it would be nice to live a life
that someone would write a song about
a tear-jerker ballad
sad and slow
like only Johnny Cash could sing
but all the good ones are dead
and all I'm left with is
some teenage poser
singing about things
she hasn't lived to see yet

so much pain in what we mourn
we grieve and cry
and make a fuss
when all we love
has turned to dust
and when that dust blows in the breeze
we fall upon our quivered knees
and wonder why these things are lost
and wish them back at any cost
but all we love is in the past
and grieve the love
that would not last

there was a time
when I was a whole person
living, breathing
sure of everything
someone to be remembered
but time has caused my body
to shed its brittle skin
into something else
and the whole person I was
collapsed into dust
before being carried off
in a storm of lost souls
what was left behind
was nothing more than
a decaying reminder
unremarkable, tired
a fleeting curiosity
forgotten on the shelf
in some unassuming
shop of oddities

and the pillars
that held up the bridges
were painted in all different colors
but it would not last
before they were painted over
with other colors
and the pretty painted pillars
did nothing for the decay

sometimes after a bad week
all you can do is
kick up your feet
open a beer,
sit back and decompose
or decompress
either is fine

if I jumped in the lake
I would most certainly drown
but make sure to do it
with no one around
it is my life not theirs
with my cross to bear
and to drag others down
is surely not fair

the reason I don't
smile

when people tell me to

is because I am
rooted deeply in

reality

101

because people are dying
and failing
and suffering

the world is crashing

and that is why you must
see the sunset

on this, the longest day
of the year

I can do nothing more than sit,
head in my hands,
eyes fluttering like a knobby florescent light
listening to my own breath
pursing heavily
through my fingers
there is nothing else in me
at the moment

I suppose it is a blessing
to be capable of having thought
but also a curse
with nowhere to go
continually bouncing inside
an empty head

I fucking hate
mindless poetry
about fairytale love
it is not
tracing the perfect curves of her body
it is tracing the curves and knowing
everything is as it should be
killing ants
roast beef after sex
listening to the same story
more than once
accepting a chaos
you have no control over
and a hundred more
merely average things
that no one thinks about
because they are too busy
tending to the fairytale fire
in their soul

there was a young child
sitting in a shopping cart
crying about something
as everyone else looked on
and all I could think was;
welcome to life, kid

she wore
her heart
on her sleeve
and wiped
her nose
on mine...
THAT is love

we spoke on the phone when
he said he didn't have any words
of wisdom
but offered a block of cheese
some beer
and a couch to crash on
and that was all it took
to get over
a failed marriage

112

some days life is
a dog turd
hidden in the snow

113

ratty old shoes
on ratty old feet
judged
by rats
in polished leather

ah yes, that first puke
from the first drink
floated off his lips
like a silken spider's web
carried away in the wind
that, in a nutshell
were the teenage years

a muddy brown river
of trash
flowed by my feet

in the background
that sad old Indian
shed a tear

while further off
a hundred others
fed the muddy river

I tried to write
poetically
with a tempo,
a haiku maybe:

enough of it all
living life just for dying
who needs all the stress?

not as poetic
as I had hoped

there is a sad old man next to me
slumped over in his bar stool
enamored by the hand in front of his face,
which happens to be his own
the wad of cash he is fingering
makes me think of a bank heist
while I sip my stale two-dollar beer
trying to remember the last time
I didn't choke on the dust
of an empty wallet

in the early hours
of the days of yesterday
as the sun rises
and floats along the horizon
with my spirit
crushed and beaten
my soul left limp
as you ignore me
and leave me shaken and angry
looking for death I see the sun
just within reach
the children are returning home
and the streets are no longer crowded
and the words newly born in my head
to remind me
of the poetry
that keeps me breathing
or the skyline
in need of painting
and this is all
that truly matters

it would be interesting
to see
how the other half lives
to experience what it's like
being poorer
than I am now

121

death stood off
in the distance
just as a reminder
for me
not to become
too comfortable

madness, I call it
the decades long
string of events people call life
more insane the notion
that they have fallen in place
by nothing more
than sheer luck
but the peak of insanity is knowing
the luck will eventually run out

along the banks
with the river hidden under the trees
the tired current
splits gently from a small rock
sitting just above the water
and I am reminded
of how life itself
does the very same

a crack of the bat
the roar of a crowd
overpriced booze
the umpires call
and none of these things
excite me at all

it was a chilly day

the kind you would never
associate with mid-summer

and my mind
washed
with memories
of the past

childhood and
piles of turning leaves
ratty old sweatshirts
to hold off the chill

and I was reminded

winter was coming
and brought with it,
death

-cont.

126

she died
when I was young,
sometime in January

and for many years

I associated the
cold gray winter

with the cold gray
darkness
of her passing

I'm curious to know
what they are looking at
all of them, one after the other
as they pass
eyes locked on mine
as if I had just killed their dog
or pissed on their shoes
and all along I have been doing nothing
but standing here
smoking my cigarette
and staring at the sky

there was a time
when I looked up to her,
literally
a child staring upward
at the person who gave me life
and then there was a time
I looked down
upon her,
literally
a young man
staring at cold marble
under six feet of dirt

and as if, overnight
all of it faded into nothing
man had come
to do his worst
the lake was drained
the trees,
pulled from their roots
all for those who worship
and I was left with nothing
but the memories
that man had made me
to feel like sins

the day had finally come
where I had nothing to do
no obligations to meet
nothing to cross off a list
so I drank my second cup of coffee
and did what any would,
spending the day wondering
what I should have done

when my eyes are soupy
from the liquor
is when I see things
for what they really are
but when those same eyes
see things clearly
is when everything is a blur

the east side is the place to be
if you want to get shot
or you can choose to be stabbed
if that's how you like it
cautionary words from many
upon my arrival to this rust belt city
the east side is the place to be
when you want your life to be
lifeless

to live with it is to know
the simplest task isn't so simple
and to struggle is a way of life
a shoelace untied
a dropped pencil
a routine interrupted
such simple madness

sometimes a single beer
goes down too easily
and sometimes it takes five more
to feel nothing but bloated sloshing guts
when all I wanted to do
is get very, very drunk

137

the end of the world
is all very noisy
but it was all very cliché
to begin with

and on the third day
he rose again
when he saw his shadow and said;
fuck this!
so he crawled back
into his cave
and let the world burn